DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 653 TE 001 436

By-Cooper, David

Relevancy and Involvement: Literature for the Disadvantaged.

Pub Date Oct 68

Note-6p.

Journal Cit-The English Record; v19 n1 p47-51 Oct 1968

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40

Descriptors-Creative Dramatics, Creativity, Culturally Disadvantaged, *Disadvantaged Youth, Discussion (Teaching Technique), *Discussion Groups, Dramatics, *English Instruction, Instructional Materials, Learning Experience, Literary Analysis, *Literature, Literature Appreciation, *Motivation Techniques, Novels, Secondary Education, Student Participation, Teaching Methods, Twentieth Century Literature

If the disadvantaged student can be encouraged to respond to literature through a variety of student-centered experiences, his cognitive, affective, and creative growth will be greatly stimulated. Teachers can bring into the classroom many titles of contemporary literature which reflect the current concerns of disadvantaged youth. Moreover, an imaginative and flexible approach to instruction should be utilized which makes it possible for the student to participate actively in the literary experience. Creative dramatics and independent, but guided, small group discussions are two methods which encourage participation in thinking about and reacting to literature. (JM)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED030653

THE ENGLISH RECORD

Official Publication of the New York State English Council

Copyright New York State English Council 1961

Editor: Robert W. Blake, *State University College, Brockport*
Associate Editor: Robert J. Gemmett, *State University College, Brockport*
Associate Editor: Elizabeth J. Drake, *Binghamton*

Vol. XIX OCTOBER, 1968 No. 1

CONTENTS

A TALK TO TEACHERS ..... *Jonathan Kozol* 2
TECHNIQUES FOR ALIENATING SLUM-SCHOOL TEACHERS ..... *Allan C. Ornstein* 15
LITERATURE AND LIFE: WHAT, IF ANY RELATION ..... *Linden D. Summers, Jr.* 22
AUTHOR-TITLE INDEX, VOL. XVIII 32
"WHAT'LL WE DO?" ..... *Fred H. Stocking* 37
A PROGRAM FOR THE POTENTIALLY-GIFTED DISADVANTAGED: A PROGRESS REPORT ..... *Richard Corbin* 42
RELEVANCY AND INVOLVEMENT: LITERATURE FOR THE DISADVANTAGED ..... *David Cooper* 47
ASSESSING A NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH STUDY ..... *C. James Trotman* 52
A BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS WOLFE BY NEAL F. AUSTIN ..... *Philip L. Gerber* 56
THOMAS WOLFE BY ANDREW TURNBULL ..... *Philip L. Gerber* 56
SHAKESPEARE AND THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING BY NORMAN RABKIN ..... *David G. Hale* 57
LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION BY LOUISE M. ROSENBLATT ..... *Geraldine E. LaRocque* 59
LANGUAGE AND ITS STRUCTURE: SOME FUNDAMENTAL LINGUISTIC CONCEPTS BY RONALD W. LANGACKER ..... *Robert W. Blake* 61

Member of the NCTE Information Agreement

ADVISORS

AUSTIN Mc. FOX
The Nichols School, Buffalo

CHARLES G. SPIEGLER
New York City Schools

SISTER THOMAS MARION
Nazareth College Rochester

THE ENGLISH RECORD is published quarterly (October, December, February, and April) by the New York State English Council. Editorial Office: Robert W. Blake and Robert J. Gemmett, State University College, Brockport, New York 14420; Associate Editor: Mrs. Elizabeth J. Drake, 439 Vestal Parkway E., Binghamton, New York 13903. General articles of interest to English teachers on all levels of instruction as well as poetry and fiction are invited. Manuscripts should be sent with return postage; whenever possible, documentation should be included in the text. Letters to the editor as well as book reviews are welcome. Membership (including $3.00 for a year's subscription to The English Record): $4.00 annually. Out-of-state subscription: $3.00. Individual issues: $1.00 each. Correspondence concerning subscriptions and advertising should be addressed to John C. Fisher, Executive Secretary, State University College, Oswego, New York 13126.

FE 001 436

RELEVANCY AND INVOLVEMENT: LITERATURE FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

David Cooper

The major difference between teaching the "disadvantaged" and the "advantaged" is that it is easier with the latter to get away with the irrelevant and the stultifying. Middle class students either believe uncritically in the establishment or play the conformity game because of pressures from parents and competition for university admissions. The disadvantaged, using their only weapons—disruption, sullen or hostile passivity, withdrawal—refuse to submit to a repressive classroom atmosphere and an irrelevant curriculum.

According to educational theory—philosophical, psychological, sociological—all students have the right and ability to learn, to be creative and to be treated as intelligent beings, with opinions, talents, and feelings worthy of respect. In the broad subject of English and among the great variety of approaches to teaching, there are almost limitless opportunities to provide experiences which can be creative and meaningful, and which can stimulate cognitive and affective growth. If students are given opportunities to respond to relevant literature, the English class can be the greatest liberating force in the school experience.

The content of literature.

We generally subscribe to the notion that literature should afford the opportunity to explore diverse values. One obvious way to achieve this goal is to bring many titles into the classroom. Not a few titles to substitute for the present limited choice, but varied, flexible offerings to give teachers and students freedom to choose from among the great, inexpensive variety which is available to us. It is crucial to disadvantaged youth to read materials to which they can respond—literature centered on themes and situations they can understand, characters with whom they can identify, writers and traditions they can recognize as part of their cultural heritage.

To make room for these more diverse and more relevant titles, we might question the assumption that intensive study by all students of lengthy novels is basic to the curriculum in lit-

David Cooper has published articles on English education in "Culture," "English Journal," and "The English Record." He has served as a consultant in English to many public school districts, notably contributing to the Portland Oregon High School English Curriculum Project. He is presently Associate Professor of Education at Hunter College and Coordinator of Hunter's Advanced Certificate Program in Curriculum and Teaching in the English Language Arts.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY David Cooper and Robert W. Blake (N.Y. State Eng. Council) TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

erature. Why is so much time spent studying a small cluster of Victorian novels? Agreement that our cultural heritage or the colleges demand it? Hardly. A heavy investment in inexpensive texts and polished, well-worn lesson plans? With the availability of numerous inexpensive paperbacks and a changing school population as well as changing times, one might call this deadwood rather than tradition. Perhaps the simple, conventional morals of the Victorians keep us comfortably remote from the disturbing concerns of the world. The moral and human dilemmas of Eppie and Silas and Clym Yeobright and Eustacia Vye are safe and remote enough. But more likely these novels are assigned out of unthinking habit and because they are there, in the bookroom. It would be difficult to make a case for the literary superiority of *Silas Marner* and *The Return of the Native* over *Cry, the Beloved Country* or *The Old Man and the Sea* or *Lord of the Flies*—novels which are closer to the interests of our students, which are mature, sensitive, well-written, and can be effective tools for developing understanding and taste.

Many weeks spent dissecting a work of literature that is too difficult for a poor reader or unchallenging for a bright student lead to boredom, frustration, and often an active dislike for English and for literature. The skills of reading literature might be developed through intensive study of shorter works: "The Lottery," *The Red Pony, Ethan Frome, Animal Farm, The Light in the Forest,* the Macmillan *Gateway* or Holt *Impact* anthologies —no particular pantheon of authors or their works, but selections appropriate for our students and our times. More time should be spent on individual and small group study of works which will contribute to a desire to read literature and develop the capacity for sensitive and responsible reading.

In the early years of secondary school we must begin with materials which touch upon our students' lives: *South Town, Durango Street, I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, Jazz Country, The Member of the Wedding, The Emperor of Ice Cream, The Catcher in the Rye, Black Boy, Manchild in the Promised Land, To Kill a Mockingbird, Raisin in the Sun.* For more mature students *Billy Budd, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Gulliver's Travels,* Camus, Kafka. Many of our most promising students are turned off by the narrow limitations of the school program. Why not turn them on with *Invisible Man* (Ellison), *The Fire Next Time, Blues for Mr. Charlie, Dangling Man, The Fixer, Catch 22, The Sand Box* and *The Zoo Story.* This literature reflects the growing moral relativism of our time and the sense of isolation and rootlessness of young people. We teachers have to be flexible enough to accept that today's antiheroes, opposed to many of our traditional beliefs, have as much

place in the free competition among values as do the Hardy perennials.

Getting students involved.

The term disadvantaged is somewhat suspect in that it has come to connote sub-standard performance in general. We are concerned with the educationally disadvantaged, those who, because of environmental and cultural differences, do not come up to the norms of the white middle-class school establishment. English teachers are particularly concerned with the linguistically disadvantaged, those who do not perform well in a system which depends heavily upon reading and writing skills for educational advancement.

Though at present there is little empirical evidence to support the contention, there is a great deal of testimony to indicate that when students are dramatizing, discussing, reacting to each others' ideas, responding to sense experiences, the differences between the performance of advantaged and disadvantaged students are no longer obvious. In many years of teaching and observing classes of the disadvantaged many of us have, in fact, been excited by what seems to be the tapping of deep wells of creativity and original thinking ordinarily lacking in the regimented classes of the college bound. Two methods which encourage full participation in thinking about and reacting to literature are dramatization and small group discussion.

Instead of studying plays as they do other forms of literature, students might be involved as actors and audience. Plays were written for these purposes, not to be read. A goal for all students, not just the disadvantaged, is to become habitual and discriminating consumers of drama in stage, TV, and movie versions. What better way of involving them than directly as producers of drama in the classroom?

A suggested unit on drama: The teacher discusses seven or eight plays with the class. The students choose four or five which they would like to study and "produce." Students select the individual plays in which they wish to participate. Generally the more able students will select the more difficult plays—although some teacher guidance may be advisable. Each student, in addition to reading one or more parts, makes an additional contribution as director, continuity writer, editor, sound technician, music consultant, typist, etc. With the aid of the teacher, each group selects a few key scenes which can be presented comfortably within one class period. The major part of three periods is needed for preparation—the first for organization and the others for rehearsal. One performance is scheduled each week as the culmination of the class study of the play. The parts should be read, not memorized, and suitable modifications of the text should

be made to give the semblance of continuity and completeness. Presentations in the form of radio or TV productions add to the sense of a real performance. The coming to the schools of closed-circuit TV and videotaping will be a great boon to such an undertaking. A variation is to have each of the groups perform portions of each play. Other variations: Dramatizations, written and performed by students, of short stories or scenes from novels. Dramatized projections of alternate endings or sequels of literature studied in class.

Group discussion: The hallowed "developmental" lesson in which the teacher moves from motivation to surface comprehension to understanding of the author's craft to interpretation or appreciation often becomes a daily ritual game in which a few students participate by guessing the interpretation of a work of literature at which the teacher wants them to arrive. Certainly it is important to teach the understanding of literature in a systematic manner. But it is at least equally important to give students an opportunity to respond freely and imaginatively to literature and to discuss what they read with their peers in uninhibited exchanges.

A suggested approach to fiction: The teacher spends a few periods on explication of the elements of fiction in class discussions of two or three popular short stories with clearly delineated characters, plots, themes, etc. The class then selects from a number of short stories those they would like to discuss in small groups. If it is a new experience for the class, some time is spent on the techniques and purposes of group discussion: the role of the leader, the framework and direction of the discussion, the selection of subtopics, the preparation of discussion questions; the necessity for sticking to the topic, respecting the interpretations and opinions of others, supporting opinions and conclusions by reference to the text, recognizing the individual nature of responses to literature. Many of these insights can be elicited from the class after as well as before discussions begin.

A different story is discussed each day. Each group, on the previous day, has approximately fifteen minutes for a buzz session to select a leader, assign subtopics, and prepare key questions. At the outset the discussions might be structured around the elements of literature, one student concentrating on characters, another on setting, another on theme, etc. Students are encouraged to exchange ideas freely, not to make set speeches. With greater experience, students are able to perform well within freer and more varied structures. They might all, for example, choose to discuss one character from the point of view of other characters in a story or novel. The discussion takes place in front of the room with the balance of the class as an audience.

After approximately thirty minutes, members of the class are invited to react to the discussion, and enough time is left for the next group to hold its planning session while the other students begin reading the next story. The discussions might be recorded so that students may have an opportunity to evaluate their own performance.

Variations: Five or six groups engaged in discussion of the same work simultaneously, with a reporter summarizing for each group. In a thematic unit arrangement, students discuss the literature assigned to their group.

In addition to providing an audience of peers and a freer vehicle for exchanging ideas than the conventional classroom format, small group discussion insures that every student will participate on a fairly equal basis. Participation tallies show that in teacher-led discussions from three to five students, almost always the same ones, are involved to any significant extent.

The timid and the traditional are often reluctant to depart from the conventional format for fear of discipline problems, particularly with disadvantaged students. Very often rigid, ritualistic procedures designed to keep students busy, orderly, and quiet are defended as bringing much-needed order into their undisciplined lives. Students do a great deal of copying: "our aim for today," rules of grammar and the conventions of writing, brief biographies of authors, workbook exercises, forms for business letters, etc. When they recite, or write it is only for the teacher's benefit. "Can anyone tell *me*. . . ." "*I* want you to write. . . ." Independent thinking about literature is often patronizingly "corrected" because it does not conform with the teacher's interpretation.

It is not only the irrelevancy of the textbook contents, but also this stifling conformity which, according to Kohl, Kozol, Hentoff, Holbrook, *et al.*, is killing our children. Certainly there must be order in the classroom—to establish an atmosphere in which creativity can flourish. The teacher's chief function is to set the stage for meaningful student-centered experiences with literature, not to impose his ideas through the lecture-recitation method. He must plan very carefully in selecting literary materials, preparing students for group work or dramatization, budgeting time, working out procedural details, physical arrangements, use of equipment, etc.

The teacher is also disadvantaged, limited by tradition, by bureaucracy, by the blinders of a culture different from that of his students. He can be liberated along with his students when they begin to experience the intellectual and emotional involvement in literature, the pleasure of recognition and achievement, the thrill of thinking freely and learning.